

Where to Khmer

Temple hopping around Angkor Wat is hungry work, which is just as well, because Siem Reap's culinary schools and hip restaurants are laden with temptations.

Text by Cynthia Rosenfeld



Angkor Wat is a feast for the eyes, but there's much more to experience in Siem Reap.

Argusphoto



Take a break from sightseeing and relax among the lush greenery of the Cambodian city.

Most people come to Siem Reap for Angkor Wat, the most famous of more than 250 ancient stone temples, buildings and monuments dotted among the palms surrounding the small city. But I was there for the food. More precisely, to sample the cuisine at two cookery training schools changing the lives of their young graduates.

The first is in the Shinta Mani Hotel. Originally an 18-room inn, the hotel's philanthropic side mission attracted the attention and support of uber architect Bill Bensley, who in 2012 artfully expanded the hotel into a two-storey 39-room photogenic showpiece.

I recognise many of the hotel's nearly 100 staff from previous visits to the their development centre. The 10-year-old training programme is now housed upstairs next to Bensley's Bar, but my first stop is downstairs at Kroya, the hotel's nouvelle Khmer eatery.

Kroya means "food" in the Royal Khmer language and we're soon tucking in to luscious herb- and chilli-rubbed salmon with papaya salad, which comes wrapped in Japanese seaweed and tossed with sesame oil. The contemporary twist continues with grilled red mullet with amok ravioli and pumpkin blossoms stuffed with sweet potato and topped with lemon grass and turmeric coconut foam. For dessert, we move outside to recline on traditional swings hung on two-storey-long ropes and share sweet tomato stuffed with fruit compote, fresh ginger and lemongrass; dripping with coconut ice cream. My dinner companion later complains the dessert divide worked unfairly in my favour.

After rising at 5am to watch the sun rise over Angkor Wat, I'm ready for lunch amid the tropical flowers of Le Jardin des Délices. It's run by the students of Ecole Paul Dubrule,

a hospitality training institute started by the co-founder of the Accor Hotel Group. Today's menu includes Khmer banana flower salad, grilled beef tenderloin, poached fish in white wine and chocolate soufflé, which tastes all the sweeter for being made by hard-working young students seeking a better life.

Motivated as much by gluttony as good intentions, I organise dinner with friends at The Hive, behind Hotel Riviera. Previously the cheery American-style diner Snappy, The Hive is now a chic new café run by two Australian expats. The destination features a warm duplex space decked out in modern furnishings and specialises in Lavazza coffee, a range of baked goods (chocolate chip cookies, anyone?) and western creations. Open for breakfast, brunch and lunch, The Hive offers a welcome taste of home for weary travelers in need of a solid caffeine fix and classic western fare – all crafted with fresh ingredients sourced from the local market.

Next up: pure self-indulgence at Amansara, where Prince Norodan Sihanouk's 1962 Villa Princiére has been reborn as 24 luxurious suites in polished concrete and lacquered teak. I stayed there on my last birthday, rung in with bowls of nom ben chok curry noodle soup with tamarind sauce served in the resort's traditional village house amid the temples. American chef Molly Rygg serves up Western and Khmer dishes, including refreshing cucumber mint soup, top sach chruk pork curry with eggplant, trei oeng skewers of grilled bar fish with crushed lemon grass and my favourite chocolate brownies, with chunks of white chocolate.

Later, bypassing the youth scene on Pub Street, I follow a whiff of incense down The Lane, where Kiwi Dean Williams recently doubled the size of his popular Shanghai-inspired cocktail lounge, Miss Wong. Its dim sum is the talk of Siem Reap. I understand why

as I bite into succulent shrimp har gow and, at Williams' recommendation, tea-smoked tofu stuffed with mushrooms, braised with bak choy in vegetable stock and drizzled with honey and soy. Equally delicious is the barbecue duck slider, an American burger that embraces Asia with plum and black bean sauce and a steamed Chinese bun with lettuce, tomato, onions and mayonnaise.

New to the scene is brunch at the Sister Srey Café. Run by Australian sisters Cassie and Lauren Gravett, a former Melbourne barista, the open-air two-storey eatery serves artfully topped lattes, juicy lentil burgers, grilled chicken salad and sweet potato fries. I sip watermelon fruit shake and eavesdrop on gap-year diners discussing the cheapest route to Phnom Penh.

As late morning passes into early afternoon, I cross the river for more fabulous fare. Run by a French make-up artist, Upstairs Café on Wat Bo Road serves a winning combination of healthy salads and indulgent cakes, including Asia's tastiest chocolate fondant. Then I head out of town to check in to Siem Reap's first private vacation villa, Maison Polanka. Elegant Franco-Khmer owner Nathalie Saphon Ridel serves a bountiful breakfast of fruit salad and homemade breads in an airy poolside pavilion between the two wooden villas on stilts, the four-room Maison and the one-bedroom 1940s Khmer House. Dishes, which are for residents only, are culled from family recipes, both French and Khmer, including addictive rice-paper rolls and chicken soup with lemon grass, lime and herbs.

And so to my final meal. Saphon Ridel's long-serving staff treats me to duck stuffed with lotus seed, glass vermicelli and mushrooms, steamed for seven hours over a broth of sugarcane leaves as Khmer culinary tradition demands. ■

Dining Highlights

Fill your belly in Siem Reap's best eateries.

Text by Cynthia Rosenfeld



Amansara

Prince Sihanouk's renovated 1962 villa could feel intimidating but for the understated elegance of Amanresorts, which gave the regal digs a resort makeover in 2002. Inside a circular space, tables for two and four surround generously stuffed couches and a coffee table stacked with glossy magazines and photo books. American chef Molly Rygg serves Western fare such as roasted rump of veal with eggplant caviar and baby potatoes as well as classic Khmer amok trei steamed fish in coconut cream, and Siem Reap's juiciest burger.

Road to Angkor
Tel: +855 63 760 333



Kroya

Steps from the Siem Reap River, this double-height black, grey and whitewashed cafe morphs into a rare fine-dining venue after dark with white linen tablecloths. The outdoor terrace stays relaxed thanks to five traditional Khmer beds on two-storey-long ropes. Linger over Parisian-quality croissants and pains au chocolat, baked fresh by students of the hotel's philanthropic cooking school. Come back midday for juicy lemon grass chicken burgers and other light fare, and at night for contemporary twists on classic Khmer cuisine.

Shinta Mani Club
Junction of Oum Khun and 14th Streets
Tel: +855 63 761 998



Maison Polanka

Guests arrive at Siem Reap's only private villa rental through the Wat Polanka temple complex. An unmarked gate slides open to reveal a profusion of tropical leaves cossetting two Khmer wooden houses on stilts – all polished wood floors, colonial art deco furniture and Khmer artefacts. Meals cooked to French and Khmer family recipes are reserved for villa guests and served in a pavilion next to the infinity pool. Dishes include traditional Khmer amok and lok lak minced beef marinated in soy sauce with pepper and lime.

Upper East River Road
Tel: +855 12 499 810



Miss Wong

Dean Williams was a well-known radio broadcaster in New Zealand when a news story brought him to Cambodia. He decided to stay, and opened this lounge inspired by old Shanghai to close the gap between Siem Reap's hotel bars and standing-room-only club scene. His bartending staff quickly gained a deserved reputation for their exhaustive knowledge of classic and creative cocktails. His latest move is a menu of Hong Kong-quality dim sum, Singapore noodles and creative hotpots.

The Lane
Tel: +855 92 428 332



The Hive

Nestled in a quiet street a stone's throw from the Siem Reap River, The Hive is a chic cafe owned and run by two Australian expats. The spot specialises in Lavazza coffee and western style cuisine – stop by the cool duplex for breakfast, brunch or lunch. The Hive places an emphasis on sourcing the majority of their ingredients from local markets, seeking to reduce their carbon footprint by using as little imported produce as possible. For those on the road, it may offer a comforting taste of home.

631 Psar Kandal Street
Tel: +855 97 763 3484



Upstairs Café

Owner Sarah Cantero, a professional make-up artist by training, hosts regular tutorials and community events in the back room of her homey eatery Upstairs Café. Browse good deals on make-up and a tightly edited selection of costume jewellery and quirky souvenirs in the whitewashed dining room while the staff prepares fluffy omelettes, soups and garden salads incorporating the freshest market finds. Don't miss the cakes baked from Cantero's French grandmother's recipes.

Wat Bo Road
Tel: +855 97 304 3600

Reaping the Rewards

Remarkable spots to visit in the Cambodian city.

Text by Vincent Leung



Brilliant heritage

No visit to Siem Reap province is complete without visiting the renowned temple complex of Angkor Wat. It's the most famous of the breathtaking monuments around the ancient Khmer capital of Angkor Thom. Other highlights include the Bayon temple with its mighty stone towers, giant smiling faces and detailed bas-reliefs of historical and mythological events, and the delicate pink-sandstone carvings at Banteay Srei, the citadel of women. And don't miss the jungle temple of Preah Khan where nature and artistry merge.



Reviving the big top

Take a break from Pub Street with a night at the circus named Phare. Rather than relying on animal attractions, Phare tells Cambodian stories through local drama, dance, acrobatics and other avant-garde performing arts. The stars of the show are underprivileged students and graduates from its associated arts school in Battambang. The result is an emotional narrative of such artistic value that it has already won invitations for overseas tours.

www.pharecambodiancircus.org



Loosen your purse strings

For a taste of Siem Reap's dynamic social life, head to the old market Psah Chas. Popular with locals and tourists alike, look beyond the souvenirs to find authentic textiles and crafts at reasonable prices. Stalls sell indigenous ingredients and a food court serves unpretentious street delicacies such as nom pang (filled baguettes) and noodle soup as well as less tempting options such as crispy crickets and tarantulas. It's an eye-opening lesson that teaches travellers about Cambodian cuisine in a bustling, energetic environment.



FCC Angkor

Formerly the French governor's house, the Foreign Correspondents' Club Angkor is a colonial beauty with elegant proportions, classical columns and softly whirring ceiling fans. The large garden, bar and restaurant are hotspots for a restorative cocktail after all that temple viewing, and comfortable contemporary rooms surrounding a dark-tiled salt-water swimming pool offer hip accommodation.

www.fcccambodia.com/fcc-hotel-angkor



The Privilege Floor

Live like a Khmer noble on the special fourth floor of the five-star Borei Angkor Resort & Spa. The private lobby glitters with traditional motifs and the well-equipped luxury rooms are available in a choice of three packages that include extras such as a 24-hour car and guide, complimentary mobile phone, spa treatments and a countryside picnic.

www.privilegefloor.com